A fact sheet about

Forgetting to eat or drink

Understanding Zoe

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Forgetting to eat or drink

Why hunger and thirst cues can be quiet, and how to eat by an anchor.



Key points

- Hunger and thirst reach you through interoception (definition below), your sense of what is going on inside your body.
- For some people these signals are quiet or arrive late. A headache, shaky hands or a short temper can be the first sign that you need food or water.
- Missing a meal or a drink this way is not a lack of care for yourself. The message did not reach you in time.
- Tying food and drink to an anchor, something that already happens in your day, may suit you better than waiting to feel hungry or thirsty.

What hunger and thirst cues are

It is four in the afternoon and you have a headache. You think back and find you have had one coffee and no food since last night. Or you spend the day caring for someone, and at bedtime the glass of water you poured that morning is still full.

Most advice says to eat when you are hungry and drink when you are thirsty. That works when hunger and thirst tell you early. For some people they come late, or not at all, so there was nothing to act on.

Interoception is your sense of what is going on inside your body. It tells you about hunger, thirst, being full, heat, cold and feeling unwell. A hunger cue or a thirst cue is one of these inside signals, like an empty stomach or a dry mouth.

For many people a cue starts small and builds slowly, which leaves time to eat or drink. For others the early part may be too quiet to notice, so the cue may feel urgent by the time they feel it. You can read more about how hunger can feel like a bad mood here.

In one study, autistic adults rated how aware they were of thirst, and of their body, much lower than other adults did. In other studies, autistic adults described not being able to tell when they were

hungry, full or thirsty. A review of small studies suggests that ADHD people may read their body signals less clearly too. If you are neurodivergent in another way, you may recognise this too.

More broadly, research on autism, ADHD and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other marginalised groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

Why a quiet cue is easy to miss

A quiet cue needs some of your attention before you notice it. Monotropism is a name for attention that goes deep into one thing at a time. While you are in deep focus you may be very aware of what you are doing, and much less aware of what sits outside it. A faint hunger or thirst cue may be part of what you miss, and you can read more about monotropism here. You can also read more about coming out of hyperfocus here.

Mealtimes that other people set can do some of the remembering for you.

Some ADHD medicines can also lower your appetite. If you take one and often miss meals, your prescriber can talk with you about it.

The one thing to try: eat and drink by an anchor

If the cue from inside is quiet, you do not have to wait for it. You can tie food and drink to an anchor instead. An anchor is something that already happens in your day, whether you feel hungry or not.

Pick one anchor to start with:

- when the kettle boils, eat something with your drink
- when you take your morning medicine, drink a full glass of water
- when you feed a pet, feed yourself
- when you sit down at your desk, table or couch, drink first

Each one links a set moment to one action, which is called an if-then plan. In research with adults in general, people who made plans like this followed through more often than people who only meant to.

Then make the anchor easy to act on:

- keep a filled bottle or cup where you sit, so the drink is in sight
- keep food that needs no cooking and no choosing where you will see it. It can be your safe foods, and it can be the same food each day
- choose tomorrow's food today, in a list or in pictures, so there is nothing to decide when you are busy
- ask someone to prompt you: a person you live with, a support worker, or a friend who sends a message at lunchtime

Reminders from other people help most when they respect the person's limits. At work or study, a set break to eat and a drink at your desk are ordinary adjustments to ask for.

You can set a reminder in the Understanding Zoe app for the times that suit you. You can also keep your anchor in your notes there so it is easy to find and the app can send you a notification about it.

You do not have to feel hungry first, and how much you eat is up to you. Some days you will miss the anchor, and that is okay. You can also read more about getting to know your own signs of hunger and thirst here.

Eating and drinking by an anchor comes from what neurodivergent adults say has helped them. It has not been tested in research yet, so it is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it. And lived experience is valid too.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, whether this happens every day or only now and then. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help with eating, drinking and body signals, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you.

You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

Tell your GP if you often feel faint or unwell after missing food or drink. Tell them too if eating has become stressful or frightening. That is a different thing, and it needs its own conversation.

Sources

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Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

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